

Rep. Rebekah Warren - Hearing on Great Lakes Restoration Initiative

From: "Susan Lackey" <susan@legacylandconservancy.org>
To: <rebekahwarren@house.mi.gov>
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Subject: Hearing on Great Lakes Restoration Initiative
Attachments: comments to action plan.doc

Representative Warren,

I understand that you are holding hearings next week on the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. I have attached to this email comments that we recently sent to the EPA on the GRLI Action Plan.

Like most of Michigan's land trust community, we were disappointed that the GRLI placed such a low priority on private land protection and working through the conservancies. Most of us, working in conjunction with our watershed councils, have strategic land plans that focus on areas that result in watershed protection. The acquisition of conservation easements allows us to work with landowners to initiate private stewardship regimes that protect land while reducing the public responsibility for management and operations.

We were also disappointed in what appears to be a strong bias toward Great Lakes shoreline. River quality – sometimes far upstream from the Lakes themselves – is critical to the quality of the Lakes. While all of us in Michigan have a strong affinity for the dunes and marshes along the Great Lakes, their work as filters for the Lakes is much benefitted by improving the quality of the rivers that flow through them.

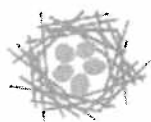
I am sorry I won't be able to attend next week's hearing, but would be pleased to talk with you or your staff if you have any additional questions.

Thank you.

Susan

Susan Lackey, Executive Director
Legacy Land Conservancy
1100 N. Main
Ann Arbor, MI 48104
734-302-5263

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We have reviewed the revised GLRI Action Plan, issued December 3, 2009, and note that the plan includes a specific reference to protecting key wetland and upland habitats on Page 37. We applaud that inclusion.

The original Healing our Waters report highlighted the importance of land protection. We were disappointed when the initial implementation RFP failed to identify funds for this effort. Without strategic land protection in our watersheds, particularly those serving the rivers that flow to the Great Lakes, efforts to restore wetlands and wetland habitat cannot be considered permanent. With strategic land protection, wildlife and habitat protection organizations buy the needed time to take on these long term restoration efforts.

Local land conservancies and local watershed councils are on the frontlines of such protection efforts, and should be considered as such by EPA. Local watershed plans can identify critical lands for protection of groundwater recharge areas, reduction in runoff and stabilization of wetlands. Intense landowner education and focused stewardship, paired with purchase of conservation easements, can provide the necessary *permanent* protection of these lands.

For some lands, outright purchase and incorporation into public land holdings may be appropriate. However, this is a costly effort, and brings with it permanent costs to state and local governments that they are currently ill equipped to undertake. **Purchase of conservation easements is a less costly process that, if paired with appropriate stewardship and landowner education, can be equally effective.** Local, community-based organizations are best equipped to undertake this work, and should be given priority for funding.

A funding strategy to quickly lead to implementation should include:

1. Funding to watershed councils to identify, at the parcel level, important wetlands and uplands for protection.
2. Funding landowner education designed to encourage private stewardship on these lands.
3. Funding purchase of conservation easements on these lands, with terms and conditions adequate to protect the identified conservation values leading to Great Lakes protection.